

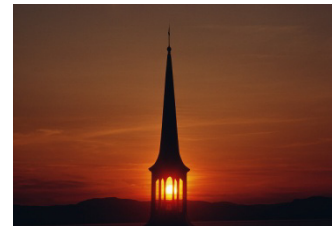
Outreach, Capacity Building, and Post-Disaster Distribution of Goods and Services to Low-Income Populations

*Presented by Rev. Jack Little, East Cooper Community Outreach (Charleston/Tri-County Area,
South Carolina)*

Lessons Learned: A robust network of supportive services for those in need built at the grassroots level during times of normalcy provides the structure, mechanisms, and trust needed to assist those in need during times of disaster. To accomplish this, local government and grassroots and faith-based organizations must partner.

While disasters are synonymous with destruction, disasters can also stimulate the creation of new grassroots organizations that have an enduring and pervasive presence in a community. Hurricane Hugo was the stimulus for the formation of East Cooper Community Outreach (ECCO), an organization that provides community support services to disadvantaged populations. Twenty years after its founding, it has grown and continues to serve the community.

Originally formed by a Catholic church for emergency distribution of food during Hurricane Hugo, ECCO now has 13 staff members, nearly 100 volunteers, a distribution center, a medical clinic and offices, and partner organizations – all serving an extensive program outreach effort assisting those living in situational and generational poverty. Through direct aid and partnerships, ECCO distributes food, clothing, and household furnishings. It also provides emergency financial aid; medical, dental, and pharmaceutical care; free counseling; referral services; and educational programs (including GED instruction) designed to break the cycle of poverty.



Rev. Jack Little, executive director of ECCO, describes the organization by its tagline, “neighbors helping neighbors.” The organization primarily serves residents located east of the Cooper River and south of the Santee Basin (Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, and surrounding areas), but it also serves the entire Tri-County area through cooperation and coordination with other organizations and agencies.

Because the area east of the Cooper River (population 80,000) has one large municipality, Mount Pleasant, and a number of smaller townships with limited means, coordination between multiple jurisdictions is important both to assess post-disaster needs and to distribute goods and services. According to Little, “The area is characterized by large areas of economically disadvantaged and isolated residents in need of robust support networks. The farther from the Arthur Ravenel Bridge, which connects peninsular Charleston with Mount Pleasant, the greater the poverty.”



ECCO, recognized as an innovative and highly effective organization, is a model for other communities. One of its greatest strengths is serving as a unifying organization for churches in the area. Churches have been long recognized as agencies dedicated to good works, but they often are an untapped resource when it comes to coordinating efforts with government and other nonprofit organizations. ECCO harnesses the churches' volunteers to this end, adding valuable resources through planned and coordinated efforts. As the coordinating agency, ECCO assists churches and other organizations in developing disaster preparedness plans. By organizing the churches into community clusters, the churches have developed plans for providing relief services in their own neighborhoods. ECCO works with the church clusters to help them identify specific community needs and assess their strengths and capacities. Through this process, the churches determine their

responsibilities in the event of a disaster, be it providing housing, home repair, distribution of supplies, relief to shut-ins, etc.

Part of the planning and coordination focuses on providing training, but ECCO also engages churches in expanding the network by recruiting other churches into their clusters, including those in the inland and rural areas. "We have purchased digital radios that will be placed in the community. During a disaster, it's likely that cell phone towers will go down," explained Little. "We must know the needs of the community. The city helped us do a transfer switch for generators. We've also increased our services – we now have medical, dental, GED/education, and free counseling – and are now able to look at some of the root causes of the poverty. We're able to help communicate plans. We serve as a liaison to manage partnerships, and we're providing training for volunteers."

Participating churches play an important role by identifying and locating their most vulnerable members and neighbors, making sure they are aware of the resources available and helping provide them. In particular, ECCO encourages churches to locate the elderly, those with special needs, or those without transportation. Participating churches are now positioned to play a vital and well-organized role in disaster response.

By working closely with the town of Mount Pleasant, Charleston County, and other nonprofits including the Red Cross, ECCO's "programs and services strive to guide clients toward self-sufficiency," said Little. The planned relief services of ECCO (1) encourage churches to monitor vulnerable populations before and after a disaster; (2) develop and distribute relief information important to clients and area churches; and (3) coordinate plans and partner with towns, cities, counties, and other relief agencies such as the American Red Cross, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Salvation Army.

In April ECCO celebrated the grand opening of its renovated and expanded building and warehouse. The expansion added four counseling rooms, three additional examination rooms for the free medical clinic, and a child care area for parents who attend educational and job

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readiness classes in the new educational center. Of the grand opening Little said, “It was with pride and thankfulness that we invited those who gathered to tour the facility to see these things that will enhance our outreach.”

When ECCO occupied its current 14,000 square foot facility in 2006, they made an agreement with the town of Mount Pleasant to serve as a distribution center for disaster relief supplies. The city helped to upgrade the distribution building and provided emergency generators. The city also provided tax relief to the faith-based groups that organized into a formal 501(c)(3) network to provide critical goods and services. During a disaster, the building will warehouse and distribute goods that flow from the North Charleston Convention Center, which serves as the Tri-County’s designated emergency distribution center. Since ECCO already has a well-established system to distribute goods to those in need and is well known by its service population, serving that function in a disaster should be relatively seamless.

ECCO recently completed an Advancing the Mission Campaign, which generated a Disaster Relief Fund of \$360,000. The goal was to raise \$1.2 million, with 30 percent earmarked for disaster relief and potentially Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. CERT educates people about disaster preparedness for hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations. Using the training learned in the classroom and during exercises, CERT members can assist others in their neighborhood or workplace following an event when professional responders are not immediately available to help. Since 2006 ECCO has hosted several disaster preparedness meetings and retreats.



“The increased reach of the municipalities has resulted in serving thousands of people in the area who might otherwise be underserved,” said Little. “Continued growth of ECCO services helps to improve the day-to-day quality of life of residents and to break the cycle of poverty. This has increased the resilience of entire East Cooper region.”